

Article



Special Issue: *Cross-Cultural Studies in Well-Being*

Weaving the Good Life in a Living World: Reciprocity, Balance and Nepantla in Aztec Ethics

James Maffie

Department of American Studies, 1328 Tawes Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20740

Abstract | The Aztecs saw themselves living in a world that was not only inherently unstable but also inexorably destined to succumb to imbalance-induced total destruction. They perceived human beings' hold on life in these circumstances as inescapably "slippery" and thus fraught with hardship, pain, suffering, sorrow, hunger, disease, and death. Stubbornly refusing to surrender to despair, Aztec philosophers (*tlamatinimeh*) responded with what they called *toltecayotl* or "the art of living wisely and well." Toltecayotl enjoined humans to pursue balance in all matters, ranging from how they treated themselves and other humans to how they treated the countless other-than-human agents populating their living world. Humans attained balance in two principal ways, both of which Aztec philosophers understood in terms of the indigenous concept of a *nepantla* process, a paradigmatic example of which was the artisanal process of weaving. Humans accordingly attained balance: first, by weaving together individual behavioral extremes (such as fasting and feasting) into a well-middled, individual life fabric; and second, by weaving themselves together with other human and nonhuman agents into a single, well-middled, community life fabric by means of initiating and participating in relationships of mutuality and reciprocity. Humans lived well and lived wisely when they crafted their lives as well-skilled weavers.

Editor | Gregg D. Caruso, Corning Community College, SUNY (USA)/Owen Flanagan, Duke University, USA.

Correspondence | James Maffie, Department of American Studies, 1328 Tawes Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20740; **Email:** maffiej@umd.edu

Citation | Maffie, J. (2019). Weaving the good life in a living world: Reciprocity, balance and Nepantla in Aztec Ethics. *Science, Religion and Culture*, 6(1): 15-25.

DOI | <https://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2019.6.1.15.25>

In one of the many Mexica *huehuetlatolli* ("words of the elders" or "ancient talks") recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún in the decades following the 1521 fall of the Mexica (Aztec) empire, a noble mother advises her coming-of-age daughter:

Behold the road thou art to follow. On earth it is a time for care, it is a place of caution... We travel, we live along a mountain peak. Over here there is an abyss, over there is an abyss. If you goest over her or if thou goes over there, thou wilt fall. Only in the middle doth one go, doth one live.¹

Her instruction would have at some point undoubtedly included the proverb, *Tlaalahui, tlapetzcahui in tlalticpac*, "It is slippery, it is slick on the earth"² or "Things slip, things slide, in this world,"³ explaining that this was said of a person who had enjoyed a well-balanced, morally good life, only to slip into wrongdoing, as though in slippery mud. In this manner Mexica parents introduced their children to the nature of human existence and advised them how they ought accordingly to live their lives. Life is evanescent, perilous, and fragile. Their best intentions, training, and their lifelong achievements notwithstanding, humans invariably lose their balance on "the slippery

earth,” inescapably suffering as a result pain, sorrow, torment, hunger, thirst, insanity, disease, or death as well as domestic, social, agricultural, or cosmic discord and disintegration.

Mexica parents’ advice regarding the human existential condition was part of a larger Mexica conception of the good life reflected upon and discussed by Mexica *tlamatinimeh* (pl; *tlamatini*, singl.; lit. “knowers of things,” philosophers, sages, wise ones). Mexica *tlamatinimeh* possessed knowledge of and instructed people in *toltecayotl* or the art of living wisely -- which they equated with living a good life, a morally upright life, and a genuinely human life.

Humans attain such a life by creating, maintaining, and participating in a well-balanced *human lifeway* as well as well-balanced *world lifeway* consisting of human and *other-than-human* agents and their social interrelationships, here in the Fifth Age *lifeworld* of the cosmos.⁴ What’s more, given their essential interdependence, humans live in balance and attain well-being *if and only* the Fifth Age lifeworld (including other-than-human agents) does so as well.

Human well-being, the good life, and the genuinely human life are *constituted by* and *consequent upon* well-balanced living. Well-balanced living, in turn, is principally *constituted by* and *consequent upon* two kinds of *nepantla*-defined activities: individually and socially oriented. Humans create and maintain well-balanced human and world lifeways by initiating new and renewing existing relationships of reciprocal gifting with other agents, both human and other-than-human. I call these activities *socially oriented nepantla* processes. Humans also create and maintain well-balanced human and world lifeways by middling the various forces comprising the confluence of body-mind forces constituting their individual selfhood. I call these activities *self-oriented nepantla* processes. Both fall under the broader conceptual umbrella of *nepantla* processes (more anon). The distinction between self- and socially oriented processes is one of emphasis only, however, seeing as Mexica philosophy draws no modern, Western-style distinction between self vs. other, self vs. society, or self vs. world or ‘nature’.

Humans (and other-than-humans) live in a world consisting of social relationships with other agents, and they are defined in terms of these relationships. As a consequence, they are necessarily affected by the

quality of these relationships. An individual’s own balance is interwoven with the balance of those around her, since how she treats others affects the balance of her own body-mind confluence. For example, by imbalancing other agents (i.e. as we shall see, by acting immorally), one unbalances one’s self, since such behavior leads inexorably to one’s own mental or physical disease (understood in terms of imbalance and loss of well-being). On the other hand, one balances oneself by balancing others (i.e. by acting morally). In short, one improves oneself by improving others, and harms oneself by harming others. Moreover, one cannot balance oneself *in isolation from* others since balancing oneself requires participating in interpersonally oriented *nepantla* processes involving reciprocity with others. One can only become a well-balanced agent (and hence morally upright) in the company of and with the assistance and cooperation of other agents. In sum, humans attain well-being, the good life, and genuine humanness only through individual effort and through well-balanced relationships with other agents, both human and other-than-human.

The good life thus requires continually balancing one’s self and one’s social relationships with others. Since the inhabitants of the Fifth Age are holistically interrelated, balancing oneself involves balancing the Fifth Age lifeworld, and vice versa. Self- and socially oriented *nepantla*-defined processes are the principal paths to *balancing well*, and balancing well is the only path to well-being.

Balance

Well-balanced living requires that one balance the bodily components and vital forces comprising one’s own body-mind confluence, as well as balance one’s relationships with other humans (including deceased ancestors) and other-than-human agents (including creator beings, rivers, mountains, fields, animals, plants, houses, tools, and artworks).

Mexica *tlamatinimeh* understood balancing as a *process* -- a dynamic, diachronic, dialectical, agonistic, and middling process -- rather than a single event or static condition. The ordinary activity of walking neatly illustrates their understanding. Walking is a process, not an event. It is diachronic, not static. Walking requires being able to achieve an overarching, diachronic balance between a repeating series of momentary imbalances. Starting from a standing position, one

extends one's left leg forward, shifts one's weight left-forwardly, and in so doing puts oneself off balance. But before falling leftwards too far and crashing to the ground, one quickly extends one's right leg and shifts one's weight rightwards. This, of course, creates a right-leaning imbalance that counterbalances the first, left-leaning imbalance. However, before falling rightwards too far and tumbling to the ground, one quickly extends one's left leg, thereby shifting one's weight leftwards. The process of walking involves repeating these alternating unbalancing and counter-balancing movements over and over again. One does not try to strike a static middle or mean point; rather one passes through such a point in the constant "to-and-fro" of walking. One middles oneself dialectically by incorporating and weaving together alternating imbalances. One walks straightforwardly by walking crookedly. One walks in balance by unbalanced walking. One balances oneself by walking *middlingly* — not by *being* in the middle. Repetitive, alternating individual acts of short-term imbalance are woven together into a diachronic process of long-term balancing. One also struggles to bring these opposing imbalances into balance. Balancing is neither a process of peaceful cooperation nor an unchanging condition of quietude.

Viewed kinesiology, walking illustrates the autochthonous Mexica notion of a *nepantla* process. The concept of *nepantla* describes a condition of being in the middle, betwixt-and-between, and neutral (neither fish nor fowl). Being in *nepantla* conveys a sense of abundant reciprocity or mutuality; or more precisely, a back-and-forth process that consist of being abundantly middled, betwixted-and-betweened, and centered.⁵ The Mexica used *nepantla*-related nouns to refer to following: the "messenger between two people," "reciprocal greeting," "agreement or conformity of reasons and opinions," "copulation or carnal intercourse," and "love they have for each other".⁶ *Nepantla*-related verbs include: weaving together; sexual commingling; getting married; creating bonds of friendship; mutual greeting; arriving at mutual agreement; and intersecting, uniting and joining together two things.⁷ *Nepantla* processes join, interlace, interlock, or unite two things together; they mix, fuse, shake, or weave things together; and they do so in a way that is middling, betwixting-and-betweening, and abundant with mutuality and reciprocity. Finally, they do so in a way that is simultaneously creatively destructive, destructively creative, and therefore fun-

damentally transformative.

Weaving embodies perhaps most paradigmatically the properties of a *nepantla* process: abundant mutuality, reciprocal middlingness, conceptual and metaphysical ambiguity, and destructive-creative transformation. Weaving interlaces warp and weft and in so doing creates a woven fabric, a *tertium quid*, i.e. something that is *neither warp nor weft yet simultaneously both warp and weft*. More abstractly, *nepantla* processing weaves together A and B to create a *tertium quid*, C, which is neither A nor B yet at the same time both A and B. In this way *nepantla* processes are simultaneously destructive, creative, and transformative. That which is *nepantla*-middled is well-balanced, well-arranged, and well-ordered. *Nepantla* processes are middling and balancing in several senses. First, they are middling in the intransitive sense of occurring in the middle or betwixt and between two (or more) *relata*. Second, they are middling in the intransitive sense of involving back-and-forth motion, mutuality, give-and-take, and dialectical transaction. Third, they are middling in the transitive sense of doing something to their *relata*, viz., they middle them. And fourth, they are middling in the sense of transforming the original *relata* into something new, an ontologically betwixt-and-between, a *tertium quid*.

Let's return to the mother's address to her coming-of-age daughter above. After characterizing life in terms of walking down a perilous mountain path, she advises: "*zan tlanepantla in uiloa, in nemoa*" ("only in or through the middle doth one go, doth one live").⁸ She invokes the *nepantla*-related notion of *tlaneptantla* ("in or through the middle"). In a similar *in huebuetlatolli*, a father advises his son: "*xonmimattinemi in tlalticpac, ca oticac in zan tlanepantlacayotl monequi*" ("continue with caution on earth, for thou hast heard that [middleness] is necessary").⁹ Nahuatl uses the suffix "-yotl" to form abstract nouns, suggesting we interpret "tlaneptantlacayotl" as referring to the abstract condition of "middleness" or "middlehood."¹⁰ One's conduct must be *middled* and *middling*. This advice is echoed by the adage, "*Tlacoqualli in monequi*" ("the middle good is necessary").¹¹ Alonso de Molina's sixteenth-century dictionary provides two related entries, "*tlaneptantla yeliztli*" and "*tlaneptantla nemiliztli*," which he glosses as "*mediano estado, o manera de vivir*."¹² I suggest we gloss these as "living or being middlingly" or "middled way of being or living." Those striving to walk in balance upon the slippery earth must seek a middle foot-

ing, a middled way of living. They must seek a *middled* path, not the middle path. In short, they must pursue a life defined by *nepantla*.

How does the foregoing bear upon the more personally oriented aspects of balancing? The Mexica believed the human body-mind consists of the confluence of three invisible energies -- *tonalli*, *teyolia*, and *ihiyotl* -- plus the visible energy comprising the flesh. These determine humans' physiological-cum-psychological processes, giving each person her unique character. Balancing one's body-mind confluence requires keeping these four forces in proper balance both individually and relative to one another.

One balances the four in the manner described above: dynamically, diachronically, dialectically, and agonistically. This requires avoiding activities that damage, disorder, and imbalance oneself (such as selfishness, dishonesty, and theft). When one fails to avoid these, one tries to restore balance by prescribed counter-balancing activities. Balancing also requires avoiding activities resulting in excessive accumulations of the four forces (e.g. overheating one's *tonalli*). When one fails to do so (as is indeed inevitable), one tries to restore balance via prescribed counter-balancing activities (e.g. *tonalli*-cooling). In short, one *middles* life's inevitable imbalances via *nepantla*-defined mixing and betwixt-and-betweening processes. Mexica *tlamatinimeh* accordingly enjoined individuals to middle and thus balance their lives via doing neither *too much* nor *too little* eating, sleeping, bathing, working, sexual commingling, and so on. If one slipped into excess, say by feasting, they enjoined one to middle this imbalance by fasting. Too much is to be middled by too little, and conversely. In short, personally oriented *nepantla*-defined processes enable one to weave together the inevitable excesses in one's daily life into a well-middled, well-balanced lifeway.

Interpersonally *nepantla*-defined reciprocity processes figure first and foremost in Mexica philosophy's understanding of the social aspects of balancing the Fifth Age lifeworld. Social or inter-agent well-balancing and social or inter-agent well-being are *constituted by* and *consequent upon* participating in *nepantla*-defined relationships of social reciprocity with other agents. This activity focuses on building and maintaining good social relationships with others. Understanding the social dimensions of balancing requires a brief rehearsal of the principal components of Mexica met-

aphysics.

Teotl

Reality consists of a single, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating, sacred power, energy, or force. The Mexica referred to this power as *teotl*. As the single, all-encompassing life power of the cosmos, *teotl* generates out of itself the cosmos and everything that happens in the cosmos. All existing things consist entirely of – and are thus nothing more than -- *teotl*'s energy-in-motion. Mexica metaphysics eschews ontological hierarchy along with transcendent realities, deities, and truths. It draws no principled ontological distinction between the sacred and profane (since everything is sacred), 'natural' and 'supernatural,' or human and other-than-human. Everything is cut from *teotl*'s single, sacred, ontological cloth.

Process metaphysics

Process, becoming, motion, change, and transformation define *teotl* and hence all things. What appear to be perduring objects or entities – e.g., creator beings, humans, sun, mountains, lakes, animals, plants, pyramids, and statues -- are nothing more than transitory, stability patterns in and concentrations of *teotl*'s energy-in-motion. Because essentially processive, human existence and that of the Fifth Age lifeworld are essentially unstable, evanescent, and transitory.

Animism

All things are animated, empowered, and vivified by *teotl*'s life-energy. The cosmos and all its inhabitants – from earth, lightning, rivers, wind, and sun, to buildings, featherwork, weapons, and musical instruments; from plants, animals, humans, and ancestors, to speech, stories, dance, incense, ceremonies, and songs – are vivified, active, and powerful.

Holism

Reality consists of a single, unified, all-inclusive, interdependent, and interrelated sacred whole. The individual constituents of this whole are essentially interrelated, interdependent, and inter-defined. Mexica metaphysics thus embraces pantheism.¹³

Agonistic Inamic Unity

Teotl's ceaseless becoming and self-transforming are characterized by what I call *agonistic inamic unity*, i.e. the continuing cyclical struggle (agon) between

matched dual forces.¹⁴ The Nahuatl term for the relationship between such matched forces is *inamic*. Agonistic *inamic* unity functions as the pattern by which and in which *teotl* weaves itself, reality, cosmos, and all existing things, and as such it defines the processing of the cosmos and all its inhabitants. This pattern emerges immanently from *teotl* in the way a pattern emerges in the weaving of a blanket. Mexica metaphysics conceives these matched forces as interdependent, interrelated, mutually engendering, and mutually complementary while at the same time mutually competitive and antagonistic. Neither is conceptually or temporally prior to the other. Neither is morally or metaphysically superior to the other.

Teotl's dual aspects include, for example: male-female, life-death, order~disorder, feeding~being fed, and gifting~receiving.¹⁵ As aspects of *teotl*'s energy~in-motion, they are more accurately seen, for example, as: male-ing (male-energizing)~female-ing (female-energizing); ordering energy~disordering energy; and gifting-energy~receiving-energy. Some *inamic* processes generate new (or destroy existing) *inamic* relationships. For example, a donor's appropriate gifting and recipient's accepting (gifting~receiving) generates a tertium quid, a new *nepantla*-defined *inamic* relationship: obligating~obligated or obligation-creating~obligation-incurring. *Inamic* relationships may also overlap: feeding~being fed overlaps with gifting~receiving, female-ing~male-ing, and obligating~obligated. Conspicuously absent from this list are Good and Evil. Mexica metaphysics conceives neither *teotl*, cosmos, nor human existence in terms of a struggle between Good and Evil. Indeed, Good and Evil do not exist as such. Notwithstanding, sun, thunderstorms, rivers, humans, animals, and houses, e.g., may act benevolently or malevolently towards humans – i.e. in a way that is balancing or unbalancing.

Teotl, reality, and cosmos consist of a grand, all-inclusive woven fabric of ongoing agonistic *inamic* interrelationships. Everything in the cosmos is defined in terms of a complex web of *inamic* interrelationships and interdependencies that eventually includes the entire cosmos. The cyclical, back-and-forth tug-of-war between *inamic* pairs combined with the alternating, temporary dominance of one *inamic* over its opposite both constitute and explain the genesis, diversity, movement, and momentary ordering of the cosmos.

Teotl's Cosmic Balancing as Nepantla-Defined Processing

Mexica metaphysics conceives *teotl*'s cosmic processing as a grand *nepantla*-defined weaving in progress. The cosmos as well as the human existential condition are accordingly defined by abundant mutuality, reciprocal middlingness, and destructive-creative transformation. *Nepantla* processing is the primordial and fundamental pattern of *teotl*'s ceaseless becoming and transforming. It is how *teotl*, cosmos, and human existence unfold. *Nepantla* defined processes define, generate, and constitute the cosmos and all its contents. Paramount among these are feeding~being fed, gifting~receiving and obligating~obligated. Indeed, the proper circulation of life-energy between humans, between other-than-humans, and between humans and other-than-humans consists of *nepantla*-defined *inamic* feeding~being fed, gifting~receiving and obligating~obligated.

Reciprocal gifting (of which reciprocal feeding is an instance) middles, weaves together, and transforms donor and recipient into *social beings* who become creative participants in a tertium quid, viz. an interpersonal relationship characterized by dual unity and unified duality. It binds them together in a relationship of gifting~receiving and obligating~obligated (or obligation-creating~obligation-incurring).

Reciprocal gifting functions no differently from weaving, for example, which middles, unifies, and transforms warp and weft into woven fabric, or sexual commingling which transforms male and female into male-female reproductive unity. By means of reciprocal feeding, gifting, and obligating, humans and other-than-humans generate new as well as sustain existing social relations with other agents, and in so doing contribute to and renew the balance, well-being, and ongoing existence of the Fifth Age lifeworld. By not doing so, they contribute to the imbalance, disorder, ill-being, and demise of the lifeworld.

An ontology of agents

The Fifth Age lifeworld is a social world populated by human and other-than-human agents. In brief, the Mexica conceived an agent (*chihuani*¹⁶) as an animate, vivified, and empowered being, one who is sensitive to the world around it and who also possesses the ability to act causally upon the world and to respond causally to the world. Linda Brown and W. H. Walker write,

“... this agency is autonomous, purposeful, and deliberate, and arises from sentient qualities possessed by [animate beings], such as consciousness or a life-force.”¹⁷ Agents differ from one another in terms of their degree of power, the ability to act upon the world and ability to respond to the world, their histories, the quantity and intensity of their social relationships (or active interrelatedness) with other agents, and their “personalities” (e.g. their degree of consciousness, purposes, intentions, likes and dislikes, etc.). Agents also have the capability of entering into reciprocal social relations with other agents. Agents may be more or less social. They possess the ability to act and respond socially or interpersonally to the world around them. Agents may be human but most agents in the Fifth Age are other-than-human: e.g., creator beings, earth, sun, rain, rivers, lakes, mountains, gemstones, animals, plants, feathers, agricultural fields, and incense along with spoken words, dancing, singing, music, buildings, statues, and cooking, fishing, hunting, and farming tools. Consistent with pantheism, all agents are nothing more than transitory, stability patterns of and concentrations of *teotl*’s energy-in-motion. While creator beings are certainly more powerful than humans, they are not ontologically *sui generis*. They are not gods in the Abrahamic sense.

An ontology of interpersonal relationships

The Fifth Age is also a social world in the stronger sense of being generated and constituted by a vast and complex fabric of ongoing interpersonal relationships between agents. Humans are always already born into this social fabric of dynamic interpersonal relationships. Human and other-than-human agents are defined in terms of their interrelationships within this fabric.

The interrelatedness of well-being

The well-balancedness and well-being of agents is interdependent with that of other agents. Agent A realizes his well-being if and only if agent B realizes her well-being (and conversely). Second, agent A’s well-being is a consequence of his interrelationship with B (and conversely). Third, A’s and B’s well-being is a property of their interrelationship. Well-being is thus an adverb: it qualifies the ‘how’ of A’s and B’s ongoing interrelationship. Humans attain balance, well-being and the good life not in isolation from or at the expense of other agents but rather: only in the web of their ongoing social relationships with other agents; only in their reciprocity-defined, well-balanced *inam-*

ic partnerships with others; only in actively maintaining well-balanced, reciprocal relations with others; and thus only with the cooperation and help of others. In sum, well-being, like existence itself, is relational.¹⁸

The Centrality of *Nepantla*-Defined Reciprocal Gifting to the Continuing Existence of the Fifth Age

Nepantla-defined reciprocity relations of mutual exchange between agents maintain the proper circulation of life-energy throughout the Fifth Age’s lifeworld. From these quintessentially social interactions emerge a community of humans and other-than-humans bound together as feeder~fed, gifting~receiving and obligating~obligated *inamic* partners. By means of such *nepantla*-defined processes of life-force exchange, human and other-than-human inhabitants of the Fifth Age continuously weave themselves together into a vast, interrelated and interdependent social fabric. In so doing, they not only make life possible in the Fifth Age but they also: (a) craft themselves into well-middled and well-balanced agents; and (b) craft the Fifth Age lifeworld into a well-middled, well-ordered, and well-balanced time-place. Without such reciprocity, the Fifth Age would become disordered, imbalanced, and eventually cease to exist.¹⁹

A moral cosmos

Humans are born into a moral cosmos consisting of a vast and complex fabric of moral-cum-normative relationships that bind agents to other agents, and that promote Fifth Age lifeworld balance and existence. These moral-cum-normative relationships are none other than the obligating~obligated and obligation-creating~obligation-incurring *inamic* relationships generated by *nepantla*-defined, reciprocal gifting~receiving relationships. It seems to be a brute fact about the Mexica cosmos that a donor’s appropriate gifting and a recipient’s consequent obligatory receiving (regardless of whether the latter’s reception is voluntary or even conscious, as in the case of the creator beings gifting life to humankind) generates a tertium quid, i.e. a moral relationship that binds together donor and recipient; a normative relationship of mutual and alternating moral obligation and attendant moral ought’s. By accepting the donor’s gift, the recipient morally binds herself to the donor and becomes morally obligated to ‘gift back.’ At the same time, the donor’s original gifting commits him to a normative relationship of mutual gifting with the re-

cipient, since the recipient's obligatory reciprocal gift, in turn, morally obligates the donor to gifting-back to the recipient in turn, and so on through countless iterations of the gift-exchanging cycle. In short, humans are born into and defined by a fabric of social relationships that bring with them moral obligations and responsibilities.²⁰

Mexica creation stories

By telling human beings who they are, why they were created, and what their place is in the Fifth Age, Mexica creation stories tell the Mexica how they ought to act. The stories thus function descriptively and prescriptively. They tell us the creator beings "deserved" or "merited" the existence of humans by gifting their life-energy to humans, and that they did so because they needed humans to feed them their human life-energy.²¹ The creator beings thus introduced morality into Fifth Age in the process of creating it, i.e., through their actions, not through their commandments or edicts. They weave moral-cum-normative relationships into the fabric of the Fifth Age and weave humankind into this moral-cum-normative fabric in the process of bringing them into existence. By dint of receiving the gift of life-energy from the creator beings, humans are born morally obligated to gift back life-energy to the creator beings.²² In short, humans are by their very nature and very existence bound in moral-cum-normative relationships with the creator beings. However, this fact also means that the creator beings depend as much upon humans for their continuing existence as humans depend upon creator beings for theirs! The two are equally dependent upon one another. It also means that the creator beings' original gift of life to humans implicates creator beings within a moral relationship of mutual gifting with humans. Both are morally obliged to gift-feed the other. The creator beings' acceptance of humans' return gift of life-energy morally obligates them to another iteration in the life-energy gift cycle with humans, and so on. Creator beings and humans thus feed one another their own life-energies and so eat one another's life-energies, ultimately belying any in principle ontological distinction between them.

Finally, humans are born with the moral responsibility for renewing the creator beings and hence the entire Fifth Age lifeway. Humans' participation in the ongoing weaving, balancing, and regenerating of the cosmos is physically and morally imperative. While this fact confers a unique moral responsibility upon

humans, it does not confer upon humans a morally privileged or superior position vis-a-vis the other inhabitants of the Fifth Age. It does not grant them dominion over the world.

The Moral Implications of Daily Life

Finally, the daily survival of humans ultimately depends upon food gifts from other humans and ultimately from other-than-human agents such as Earth Mother (*Tlaltecuhltli*), continually implicating humans in *nepantla*-defined gifting-receiving and morally obligator~morally obligated inamic relationships. In addition, each generation of humans is born into a human and other-than-human world community shaped by the gifts of parents and ancestors (such as food, tools, skills, knowledge, stories, songs, stored seeds, rituals, cleared fields, and irrigation canals), and are, consequently, morally obligated to reciprocate with gifts of their own.

How does the foregoing bear upon the Mexica's conception of the good life, the life of well-being?

Humans live within a complex fabric of reciprocal relationships with other human and other-than-human agents. Living in balance and hence a life of well-being consists of maintaining balance in these relationships, a process that requires continual gifting and re-gifting. Since these relationships are moral relationships, living a life of well-being thus requires constantly fulfilling one's moral obligations to others.

Social well-balancedness and well-being are constituted by and consequent upon participating in *nepantla*-defined reciprocity relationships. The social exercise of reciprocity is to be found in enacting well-balanced, morally appropriate, inter-agent processes with others. Well-balanced, reciprocal, and morally appropriate social relations with humans and other-than-human agents are one and the same. Humans thus attain well-being by means of well-balanced social relationships with others, and they attain the latter by means of initiating, maintaining, and renewing *nepantla*-defined reciprocity relationships with other agents.

Living well in a social world of agents – rather than in a mechanistic world of lifeless objects to be causally manipulated – requires social 'know how,' i.e., knowing how to get along with other agents in ways that initiate, sustain, and renew well-balanced relation-

ships. It requires having the ‘people skills’ (as we call them) needed to induce others into inter-agent relationships of reciprocal exchange so that they gift what one seeks from them -- be it food, sunlight, rain, or labor. It involves knowing how to induce others into becoming a specific kind of agent, viz., one willing to cooperate in producing some end through reciprocal exchange. That is, it involves inducing others into behaving morally.²³

Consequentialism

Mexica *tlamatinimeh* defined moral goodness/badness, appropriateness/inappropriateness, and rightness/wrongness consequentially in terms of the impact of actions, attitudes, and domestic, social, political, and economic relationships upon Fifth Age lifeworld balance. Morally right (good/appropriate) actions initiate, sustain, and renew well-balanced relations between and thus well-being among humans and other-than-humans. Morally bad (inappropriate/wrong) actions neglect, obstruct, disrupt or destroy existing balance; create new imbalance; perpetuate existing imbalances; or neglect the opportunity to create new balance. They contribute to the imbalance and ill-being of the Fifth Age lifeworld and are essentially antisocial.

Mexica ethics is thus non-anthropocentric since it takes into consideration the consequences of human behavior upon other-than-human agents. It is *this-worldly*, since well- and ill-being are defined in terms of earthly existence, not some heavenly or hellish afterworld. Finally, it is immanent in the sense that moral notions are wholly rooted in the metaphysical unfolding of *teotl* rather than in divine commandment, transcendental norm, or intrinsically rational principle.

Mexica *tlamatinimeh* encouraged the cultivation and enactment of the following dispositions in humans since they contribute to the well-balanced human life, to the genuine (*nelli*) human life, to human well-being, and therefore ultimately to the well-balancedness and well-being of the Fifth Age lifeworld: reciprocity, respect, responsibility, generosity, obedience, diligence, honesty, loyalty, modesty, cautiousness, energeticness, fulfilling obligations, self-sacrifice, bravery, discretion, purity, and cleanliness. They construe these as social virtues since they concern the effects of one’s behavior upon the well-being of others. The scope of

these virtues is non-anthropocentric since humans are expected to enact them in their interactions with humans and other-than-human agents. For instance, individuals are enjoined to show respect towards all agents, not just human agents.

Mexica *tlamatinimeh* discouraged cultivating and enacting the following dispositions since they contribute to individual, domestic, and cosmic imbalance and ill-being: neglect of reciprocity, disrespect, irresponsibility, envy, selfishness, greed, sloth, drunkenness, adultery, intemperance, dishonesty, inconsiderateness, duplicity, pride, disobedience, rebelliousness, uncleanness, and excessive activity of any kind (e.g. sleeping, eating, working, sexual commingling, etc.) Disrespect, selfishness, envy, and greed towards human and other-than-human agents amounts to refusing to enter into social relationships of mutual reciprocity or to failing to participate in those already existing -- hence neglecting to fulfill one’s moral obligations and responsibilities to others. I suggest they construed these as social vices.²⁴

Humans with these vices are in varying degrees socially distant, socially isolated, and antisocial. By refusing to participate in inter-agent reciprocal relationships with others, they preclude themselves from those cultivating processes that enable one to become genuinely human. The Mexica likened such individuals to wild deer, rabbits, and dogs who live in the uncivilized and disordered spaces of the periphery (e.g. grasslands and forests).²⁵ They characterized them as: *tlacamimilli* (a “fat and well rounded lump of flesh with two eyes,” resembling a swollen lump of maize dough or painful swollen abscess); *atlatcatl* (“not-human”); *tecuan* (“a wild beast, one who eats or bites another”);²⁶ *atlaacane* (“bestial human”);²⁷ and *zacachichimeca* (nomadic “wild men of the woods”).²⁸ Such humans are disordered, disorderly, and disordering of other agents, of social relationships, and of the Fifth Age.

Human Well-Being and Life’s Goods and Ills

Human well-being consists of a certain way of living. Walking in balance upon life’s path on the slippery earth is a process, not an event. Humans live well by middling their personal life energies and by engaging in and enacting flourishing, well-balanced *nepantla*-defined reciprocity relations of mutual gifting with the others agents of the Fifth Age lifeworld. Mexica *tlamatinimeh* taught that those living in balance may

expect to enjoy: mental-cum-physical health (these being inter-defined), laughter, warmth, sleep, sustenance, strength, companionship, family, sexual reproduction, children, longevity, sexual pleasure, honor, reduced hardship, and respect, along with agricultural fertility, success in hunting, and domestic, community and Fifth Age well-being. By contrast, those living in imbalance can expect to experience: pain, suffering, sorrow, thirst, hunger, starvation, disease, madness, perversion, filth, deformity in one's heirs, sexual infertility, agricultural infertility, famine, drought, premature death, domestic and community discord, and termination of the Fifth Age. The consequences of living well and of living poorly are entirely *this-worldly*.

Conclusion

Mexica *tlamatinimeh* instructed the Mexica how to live as accomplished weavers, weaving into a well-balanced fabric the multitude of *inamic* forces, agents, interpersonal relationships, and moral obligations constituting their lives and lifeworld.

Endnotes

[1] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles Dibble (eds. and trans.). Santa Fe: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1953-1982, Book VI:101. This essay draws deeply from: Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, "Ochpantli: The Nahua Sweep away Disorder in a Diminishing World," paper presented at the Third Annual Northeast Group of Nahuatl Studies Conference, Yale University, New Haven CT, May 10-11, 2013; Alan R. Sandstrom, "The Cave-Pyramid Complex among the Contemporary Nahua of Northern Veracruz," in James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer (eds.), *In the Marw of the Earth Monster*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005, pp. 35-68; Alan R. Sandstrom, "Sacred Mountains and Miniature Worlds: Altar Design Among the Nahua of Northern Veracruz, Mexico," in Douglas Sharon (ed.), *Mesas and Cosmologies in Mesoamerica*. San Diego: San Diego Museum of Man Papers 42, (2003): 61-62; Alan R. Sandstrom, "The Weeping Baby and the Nahua Corn Spirit," in *Mesoamerican Figurines: Small Scale indices of Large-Scale Social Phenomena*, Christina T. Halperin (ed.), Tampa: University Press of Florida, 2009: 6-21; Alan R. Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood: Cultural and Ethnic Identity in a Contemporary Az-*

tec Indian Village, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991; James Taggart, *Remembering Victoria: A Tragic Nahuatl Love Story*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007; Catherine Good, *Work and Exchange in Nahuatl Society: Local Values and The Dynamics of an Indigenous Economy*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 1993; Catherine Good Eshelman, "El trabajo de los muertos en la Sierra de Guerrero," *Estudios de cultura náhuatl* 26 (1996):275-287; Catherine Good Eshelman, "Trabajando juntos: los vivos, los muertos, la tierra y el maíz," in *Historia y vida ceremonial en las comunidades mesoamericanas: los ritos agrícolas*, Johanna Broda and Catharine Good Eshelman (eds.). INAH: México (2004):153-176; Catherine Good Eshelman, "Reflexiones finales," in *Historia y vida ceremonial en las comunidades mesoamericanas: los ritos agrícolas*. Johanna Broda and Catharine Good Eshelman (eds.), INAH: México, (2004):439-453; Abelardo de la Cruz, "The Value of *El Costumbre* and Christianity in the Discourse of Nahua Catechists from the Huasteca Region in Veracruz, Mexico, 1970s-2010s," in David Tavárez (ed), *Words and Worlds Turned Around: Indigenous Christianities in Colonial Latin America*, University Press Colorado, 2017: 267-288; and Richard Haly, "Nahuas and National Culture: A Contest of Appropriations," in *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lee Irwin, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000, pp. 157-182. My thinking on this topic has benefitted from conversations with Alan Sandstrom, Pamela Sandstrom, James Taggart, Alejandro Santana, Julie Greene, Bryce Hubner, Luís Carcamo-Huechante, Gregory Pappas, Roger Magazine, and Robert Sanchez.

[2] Sahagún (1953-1982, VI: 228), translated by Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989, p.58. For discussion, see James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014, and James Maffie, "In Huehue Tlamaniliztli and la Verdad: Nahua and European Philosophies in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Colloquios y doctrina cristiana*," *Inter-America Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2012): 1-33

[3] Translation by Thelma Sullivan. *A Scattering of Jades*, T.J. Knab (ed). New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994, p.194.

[4] The Mexica believed they lived in the 5th Age or

Sun, the last of a series of four cosmic Ages or Suns. I borrow the phrase “other-than-human” from A. Irving Hallowell, *Contributions to Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

[5] Frances Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992: pp. 160, 169, 186, 259.

[6] R. Joe Campbell, *A Morphological Dictionary of Classical Nahuatl: A Morpheme Index to the Vocabulario en lengua mexicana y castellana of Fray Alonso de Molina*. Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1985, pp. 212-213; and Karttunen (1983: 160, 169, 186, 259).

[7] Campbell (1985: 212-213); Karttunen (1992: 160, 169, 186, 259).

[8] Sahagún (1953-1982) VI: 101.

[9] Sahagún (1953-1982) VI: 126.

[10] See Karttunen (1992: 339).

[11] Sahagún (1953-1982, VI: 231), translation by Louise Burkhart (1989:134). See Louise Burkhart (1989) for further discussion.

[12] Fray Alonso de Molina, *Vocabulario en Lengua castellana y mexicana y mexicana y castellana*, 4th edition. Mexico City: Porrúa. Facsimile of 1571 edition. 2001.: 128r.

[13] See Maffie (2104) and Alan R. Sandstorm (1991, 2003, 2005).

[14] See Maffie (2014).

[15] In Maffie (2014) I designate this relationship with the tilde, “~”.

[16] *Chihuani* derives from *chihua*, meaning “to make something, do something, engender, perform” (see James Lockhart, *Nahuatl as Written. Lessons in Older Written Nahuatl*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, p.214). Formed by adding the suffix *-ni* to *chihua*, *chihuani* means “one who goes about doing something, making something, engendering, performing.” See also “Online Nahuatl Dictionary,” Stephanie Wood, editor (2000-2016) <http://whp.uoregon.edu/>

dictionaries/nahuatl/index.lasso
accessed 12/12/18.

[17] Linda Brown and W. H. Walker, “Prologue: Archaeology, Animism, and non-Human Agents” in Linda Brown and W. H. Walker (eds.), *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* (2008) 15: 298. See also Maffie 2014, Chs. 1-2.

[18] I am indebted to Brian Yazzie Burkhart, *Respect for Kinship: Toward an Indigenous Environmental Ethic*, Ph.D Thesis, University of Indiana, 2009, pp.58-61, for helping me appreciate this point.

[19] I am indebted to Alan Sandstrom for helping me appreciate the foregoing (personal correspondence with author, 2/14/2016).

[20] As Winona LaDuke writes, “Genealogical bonds are normative bonds, generating moral responsibilities to the natural world and the living beings it sustains; they give rise to “reciprocal relations” which define responsibilities ... between humans and the ecosystem, quoted in Laurie Ann Whitt, Mere Roberts, Waerete Norman, and Vicki Grieves, “Indigenous Perspectives,” in Dale Jameison (ed.), *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001, p.10.

[21] The relevant Mexica notion is *tlamacehua*. For discussion see Ulrich Köhler, “Debt-Payment to the Gods among the Aztecs: The Misrendering of a Spanish Expression and its Effects,” *Estudios de cultura náhuatl* 32 (2001):125-33; and Miguel León-Portilla, “Those Made Worthy by Divine Sacrifice: The Faith of Ancient Mexico,” in *South and Mesoamerican Spirituality: From the Cult of the Feathered Serpent to the Theology of Liberation*. Miguel León-Portilla and Gary Gossen (eds.). New York: Crossroads, 1993, pp.41-64.

[22] For Mexica creation stories see: John Bierhorst, *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992; and Sahagún (1953-1982) VII: ch.2: 3-9. For discussion, see León-Portilla (1993).

[23] See Roger Magazine, *The Village is Like a Wheel*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2012; and Perig Pitrou, “Co-activity in Mesoamerican and in the Andes,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* (Winter) 2016: 465-482.

[24] See Sahagún, (1953-1982) VI; X: 1-63.

[25] See Sahagún (1953-1982) VI: 53, 230, 253; X:38.

[26] Sahagún (1953-1982) VI:72.

[27] Molina (2001): 8r.

[28] Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961, p. 217.